



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'Great men', 'decline' and empire

Citation for published version:

Newman, A 2015, 'Great men', 'decline' and empire: Safavid studies and a way forward', *Medieval Worlds*, vol. 2, pp. 45-58. https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no2_2015s45

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1553/medievalworlds_no2_2015s45](https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no2_2015s45)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Medieval Worlds

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



›Great men‹, ›Decline‹ and Empire: Safavid Studies and a Way forward?

Andrew J. Newman*

This paper first suggests that the paradigms utilised in the study of the Safavid period in Iran (1501-1722) in the West prior to the 1979-80 Iranian Revolution have since been given a new lease on life by scholars in the field, perhaps coincidentally with the distinctly ›Islamic‹ turn quickly taken by that revolution. Now, as prior to the Revolution, ›great men‹ and ›decline‹ are the organising principle(s) of discussions in Safavid studies. These paradigms dominate the field today, even as both the number of scholars active in the study of the period and the number of the field's sub disciplines have markedly increased in the years since the Revolution.

It will then be argued that the more recent recourse to ›empire‹ as an organising principle for discussing the period has, in fact, only reinforced recourse to the above paradigms. As a result the field's discourse generally heightens a sense of overall Safavid ›exceptionalism‹, as if the period represented a major break with the dynamics of the periods in Iranian history that both preceded and followed.

A more dynamic understanding of empire, however, and finally, suggests that the period less marked a radical break either with Iran's pre-1501 history or with its more recent past and even the present than is conventionally suggested.

Keywords: Iran; Islam; Safavids; empire; Shi'ism; ›decline‹ theory; Middle East; ›great man‹ theory; Iranian Revolution.

The conventional wisdoms: ›great man‹ and ›decline‹

Standing between the Indian subcontinent, Asia and the Middle East of the Eastern Mediterranean, Iran's political, socio-economic and cultural dynamic has historically interacted with those of these other areas, in the process mediating and transforming traditions and institutions received from and transmitted to each.

The Safavid period in Iran, conventionally dated solely with reference to two, entirely ›political‹ events – the 1501 taking of the ancient capital of Tabriz by tribal forces led by the first shah Ismā'il I (d. 1524) and the capture of the then capital of Esfahan to Afghan forces in 1722 – is of especial import as the Safavid period linked the medieval and modern periods of both the history of Iran and that of the region as a whole.

Safavid Iran is often said to have left, in particular, an important legacy for the modern Iranian ›nation-state‹. That legacy includes at least three distinguishing features: the 1722 borders of the Safavid realm approximated those of modern Iran, Persian was well on its way to becoming a key, if not the pre-eminent, language on the Iranian plateau and the Twelver Shi'i branch of Islam that now predominates in Iran was declared the realm's official faith by Ismā'il and had been firmly established throughout by the political end of the period.

* Correspondence details: Andrew J. Newman, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Edinburgh, 19 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, email: a.newman@ed.ac.uk.

Prior to the Iranian Revolution ›Safavid studies‹ had its own dominant paradigm.¹

When Ismāʿil I and his tribal forces captured Tabriz in 1501 eight different rulers held sway over what would become Safavid territory. Within less than a decade Safavid forces had seized these rulers' lands and created a single political entity that dominated the Iranian plateau. The Safavid socio-political state was dominated by an alliance between a coalition of different Turkic tribes – the Qizilbāsh ›confederation‹ – that was the realm's military backbone and the Tajiks (native Persians) who furnished the political/administrative elements. At the best of times, it was usually maintained, the relations between Turk and Tajik, let alone the relations between the various tribes that made up the Qizilbāsh, were problematic. At times of stress, however, conflict between the two threatened to tear the polity apart. Thus, at the deaths of both Ismāʿil in 1524 and his son and successor Ṭahmāsp in 1576, periods of prolonged civil war ensued as Qizilbāsh members fought among themselves to create a new hierarchy of authority within the confederation and, as they did so, struggled also with Tajik elements. In both periods of internal strife, Iran's enemies – the Ottomans, to the West, and the Uzbeks, to the Northeast – invaded and seized vast chunks of Safavid territory. In both instances, the combination of internal strife and foreign invasions constituted distinctly existential threats.

Discussions of the seventeenth century prior to the Revolution conventionally viewed it as having begun with a burst of cultural and intellectual achievement, in an atmosphere of military, political, and economic stability, due largely to the policies undertaken by ʿAbbās I (1587-1629). He is credited with having repelled the foreign invaders, crushed the power of the Qizilbāsh tribes, encouraged good relations with European political and commercial interests, sponsored a renaissance in spiritual and philosophical inquiry and built magnificent buildings in Esfahan, the city that he designated as capital of the realm.

However, scholars have maintained, later shahs were weak and were increasingly dominated both by haram women and, especially, by the rising political influence of an intolerant, orthodox clerical class. The latter crushed the philosophical renaissance of the earlier half of the century and forestalled any effective Court response to a series of political, economic and military crises that increasingly enveloped the realm. The Afghan invasion and capture of the Safavid capital Esfahan in 1722 were the inevitable result thereof.²

In the years prior to the Revolution those writing on the Safavid period focused on the Twelver Shiʿi scholar Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699), as the key – and usually the

1 For a discussion of the trajectory of Safavid studies in greater detail, see Newman, *Safavid Iran*, esp. 2f.

2 See, in chronological order, Browne (d. 1926), *Literary History of Persia*; Minorsky (d. 1966), *Tadhkirat al-Muluk*; Lockhart (d. 1975), *Fall of the Safavi Dynasty*. Published as the Revolution was becoming consolidated, Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*, summed up the conventional wisdom of the field to that time. See also those additional sources published prior to the Revolution listed in the introduction of Newman, *Safavid Iran*.

only named – figure who both ended the spiritual renaissance encouraged by `Abbās I and whose political influence at court prevented the shah from addressing growing domestic and foreign challenges.³

Following the Revolution, the western-language field expanded exponentially, with many more scholars and a myriad of subfields being added. Before the Revolution, scholars mainly discussed matters relating to Safavid political history. Now, scholars in the field began to explore the Safavid economy and military, relations between Safavid Iran and its neighbours as well as family and women, tribal life and customs, religious life and discourse, religious minorities, science and medicine, art and architecture, painting, metalwork, ceramics, carpets, history writing and court-sponsored and popular literary expression.

Nevertheless, most authors still accept the period as delineated solely with reference to the capture of Tabriz and the fall of Esfahan. Scholars project modern boundaries back to the Safavid period and label variations therein over the period as lands »won« and »lost« and indeed overuse, but fail to define, the term »state«, with its implied references to fixed, internationally recognised borders, a common language and a monopoly by the centre of the use of force. Post-Revolution works still refer to the inherent and continuous conflict between Qizilbāsh and Tajik, to the repeated, largely vain, efforts of various shahs to curb the political/military and spiritual influence of the Qizilbāsh, to `Abbās I as »great« and to leaders after him as weak and to the growing power and intolerance of the religious elite. Before and after the Revolution, scholars of the period continue to take as given the inevitable decline and fall of the Safavid »state«, the latter as represented by the 1722 Afghan capture of Isfahan.

Preoccupation with the Safavid »fall« and especially dating the first signs of the Safavid »decline« ever earlier in the period, is reinforced by recourse to the critiques of the Safavid system on offer in both contemporary but, and often mainly, post-Safavid Persian-language historical chronicles and a variety of Western-language sources, including contemporary travelogues and commercial and diplomatic records. As prior to the Revolution and so since then, these sources are used in a strikingly uncritical fashion, even though they are often contradictory, offer as »fact« information gathered well after the occurrence of the events in question, or offer it in such detail – a western traveller talking about life at court, for example – as to strain belief. All these sources are, also, the product of usually unexplored vantage points and personal or other agendas that can only suggest their credibility is, at the very least, highly problematic.

3 The same sources uniformly implicate al-Majlisi in both roles. See, Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, 403, 120, 404, 194–195, 366 declared him »one of the greatest, most powerful and most fanatical *mujtahids* of the Safawi period«, and suggested that what »left Persia exposed to perils« – a reference to »the troubles which culminated in the supreme disaster of 1722«, the Afghan invasion – was »the narrow intolerance so largely fostered by him and his congeners«. Lockhart, *Fall of the Safavi Dynasty*, 32–33, 70, 71n1, 72, 72n3 described al-Majlisi as »an extremely bigoted *mujtahid*« and »a rigid and fanatical formalist«, »violently opposed to the Sunnis« who also disliked the Sufis. Al-Majlisi's »denunciation, and often persecution, of all who did not follow the straight and narrow path of his own choosing« aroused the ire of Iranian Sunnis and yet failed to inspire Iranian Shi'a »with any real martial spirit« at »the moment of supreme national crisis in 1722«. Lockhart noted that although »we have no definite proof... it is highly probable that it was this fanatical leader who was responsible for this increase in persecution« of Jews and Armenians that marked the latter half of the second Safavid century. See also Nasr, *The School of Isfahan*, 930. See also Minorsky (d. 1966), *Tadhkirat al-Muluk*, 41; Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*, 234, 237–38, 251, citing no sources. In 1981, Katouzian, (*Political Economy of Modern Iran*, 70n), a political scientist, without citing a single source, spoke of al-Majlisi as one of the »worldly religious leaders« – the only one named, in fact – who gained a »great deal of political power ... their influence was the cause of a lot of political mistakes which weakened the state, and helped the Afghan invasion.«

A more recent interest in the available Western economic data for the period, although overdue, has in fact encouraged allowing a key, if not a determinist, role in Safavid ›decline‹ to such purely economic trends and events as the movement of specie. Such references were on par with that which dominated Ottoman Studies from the late 1970s as, under the influence of Wallerstein's 1974 *The Modern World System* and the subsequent emergence of ›world system theory‹, that field explored the roots of Ottoman ›decline‹.⁴

The conventional wisdoms: Shi`i studies

The same al-Majlisi has also long been the bogeyman in the western-language field of Shi`i studies.

The Shi`i Muslim maintains that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD it was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law `Ali (d. 661) who should have inherited the Prophet's spiritual and political authority over the *umma* (the Muslim community). Thus, the Shi`a reject the legitimacy of the succession of the first three of Muhammad's successors (*khalīfa*, caliph) until `Ali himself became the fourth caliph (665–661). `Ali was assassinated and the Shi`a believe that the succession then lay with his male descendants, via his son al-Ḥusayn (also killed, at Karbala, Iraq, in 680). Each of these men is called ›*Imām*‹⁵. Between 10 to 15 per cent of Muslims today are thought to be Shi`i, perhaps as many as 200 million.

Of these, the largest group is the Twelver Shi`a. The Twelvers believe that the Ḥusaynid succession continued down the twelfth Imam who, living under the `Abbāsid dynasty (750–1258), well known for its hostility to the Imams and their followers, for his own safety went into *ghayba* (occultation) shortly after his birth in the 870s. He is alive and it is Allah's judgement as to when it will be safe for him to return.

In unpacking the trajectory of this field, as with Safavid studies, references to the Iranian Revolution are informative.

As has been discussed elsewhere in greater detail,⁶ prior to the Iranian Revolution ›modernisation theory‹ maintained that Islam would gradually ›disappear‹ under the onslaught of western secularist capitalism, just as the West itself – it was then understood – had become increasingly secularised over recent centuries.⁷

The few in these years who studied Shi`ism either studied it from the seventh century through to the faith's establishment in Iran in the sixteenth century by the Safavids or studied the faith over the centuries since that establishment.

Those who focused on the earlier period privileged the religious text, usually composed in Arabic by a very small number of scholarly elites.

4 In the Safavid case, in particular, concern with foreign trade has come to overshadow interest in the domestic economy although the importance of the latter to the Safavid economy was far greater. Note that although the rural proportion of the population far outnumbered the urban, which may have stood at between 10 and 15% of the total of ca. nine million, the available primary sources – and hence secondary sources – are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the latter. See Floor, *Economy of Safavid Persia*, 2–5 and 301, where he suggests that agriculture employed ›about 80% of the population.‹ For examples of the economic determinist view of Safavid decline, see Matthee, especially his *Politics of Trade* and, more recently, *Persia in Crisis*. In each of these, al-Majlisi reprises his customary role. See Matthee, *Politics of Trade*, 206; Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*, 185, 192, 201–02, 248, 253.

5 ›*Imām*‹, with a small ›i‹, as it were, refers to a Muslim prayer leader.

6 Newman, *Twelver Shiism*, 1f.

7 See, for example, Lerner, *Passing of Traditional Society*; Halpern, *Politics of Social Change*.

From the Safavid period on, however, the study of the faith overlapped with the study of modern Iran. From this period, the relevant sources for the study of the faith comprised the religious texts, still mainly composed in Arabic, but also a plethora of Persian-language religious and non-religious sources – such as court chronicles – and numerous European-language sources, including commercial and political records, travelogues and missionary accounts, for example.

Generally speaking, prior to the Revolution scholars of both periods noted, focused on and/or accepted the understanding that Shi'ism was mainly an esoteric faith, and stressed the compatibility of certain key aspects of the faith with Sufism, Islamic mysticism.⁸ The high point of the exploration by Shi'i scholars themselves into such compatibilities was supposedly reached in early seventeenth century Iran, during the reign of, and encouraged by, the same `Abbās I, only to be terminated later in the same century at the hands of such rigid, intolerant clerics as Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1699), the very same figure blamed by scholars in Safavid studies for the fall of Esfahan. Thereafter the faith lost its philosophical ›edge‹ at the hands of scholasticism and became rigidly formalist, and ›political‹, in nature.

Thus scholars of both Safavid studies and of Shi'i studies were fixated with great men, the same ›great man‹ in the case of al-Majlisī, and decline. Generally speaking, however, in the years prior to the Iranian Revolution, scholars in both fields also accepted the basic tenet of ›modernisation theory‹, that, as Islam itself, the Twelver faith was of increasingly little relevance in the modern world and, as Islam itself, like religion in the West, would soon ›wither away‹.⁹

The event of the Revolution itself, let alone the distinctly ›Islamist‹ nature that opposition discourse throughout the Islamic/Middle Eastern world so quickly assumed, caught the Academy completely by surprise.

Whatever impact the Revolution in Iran may have had on Iranian society, on other Middle Eastern/Muslim societies and on Iran's relations with rest of the world, its particular impact on the study of Shi'ism was, as with Safavid studies, paradoxically immense and limited.

Just as Safavid studies now comprises a much vaster array of secondary sources so in Shi'i studies, the interested layperson now has at his/her disposal a vast array of monographs, journal articles and book chapters addressing issues in history, art, anthropology, politics, country-based studies, gender studies, international relations and Islamic studies. The range of primary sources – that is Arabic and Persian language materials, not to mention material in the other languages of Shi'ism, such as Urdu – far exceeds the small number of such works available before the Revolution. This is thanks, for example, to Iranian government and Iranian semi-official or private religious foundations' efforts to publish sources long out-of-print of hitherto, and mainly, available only in manuscript form. Non-Iranian communities and organisations likewise gradually established a presence in this arena.

Yet the field of Shi'i studies for the most part continued to subscribe to the same essentialist visions of the faith that had dominated the field prior to the Revolution. Soon after the Re-

8 For a typical, and very influential, example, see Corbin (d. 1978) who stated: »Shiism is, in essence, the esotericism of Islam« (Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 36).

9 One struggles to find references to the faith as ›meaningful‹ or ›relevant‹ in such works as Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran*; Avery, *Modern Iran*; Bill, *Politics of Iran* and, on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, Halliday, *Iran*. Note that in Iraq in the early 1970s the Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) was delivering the lectures that would become his famous *Islamic Government*; the works above contain little if any mention of Khomeini, or even Shi'ism in Iraq. For the text of *Islamic Government*, see Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*.

volution, Arjomand echoed that earlier paradigm by stating that Shi'ism was characterised by ›pious antipathy toward political power‹ but that the Ayatollah Khomeini had politicised the faith by recourse to its earlier ›mahdi-istic‹ tendencies.¹⁰ Kramer's edited volume *Shiism, Resistance and Revolution* presented articles highlighting the supposedly inherently expansionist tendencies of Iran's Shi'i revolution and the imminent takeover of the Gulf and other nearby states by local Shi'i elements if not by Iran itself.¹¹ Nasr, a colleague of Corbin, the former's son V. Nasr and Dabashi also portrayed ›real‹ Shi'ism as essentially apolitical and otherworldly.¹² Amir-Moezzi, a specialist in the earliest history and doctrines of the faith, characterised ›early Imamism‹ as ›an esoteric doctrine‹ that became politicised and changed into ›an ideology‹ in the late-Safavid period at the hands of ›the Doctors of the Law‹. As a result ›political ambition and power‹ took over and the ›jurist-theologian took the place of the Imam‹.¹³

These visions of Shi'ism continued to privilege both Iranian Shi'ism as the normative form thereof¹⁴ and, both before 1501 and after, the religious texts works composed over the centuries by a handful of clerical elites as embodying the faith's normative doctrine and practices, both in the past and the present.

To be sure, the Safavids did declare Twelver Shi'ism the official faith of their Iran-plateau based realm. But, while it is true that today most Iranians are Shi'i it is also true that most of the world's Shi'a are not Iranian – there are more Arab and Indian/Pakistani Shi'a, for example, than there are Shi'a in Iran.

Indeed, the very years since the Iranian Revolution in which these paradigms have taken on new life also witnessed the appearance of a wealth of studies on non-Iranian Shi'ism. These include country studies – on Lebanon, the Subcontinent, Iraq, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia as well as North America – as well as studies by anthropologists on variations in some ›non-salvation‹ issues of Shi'i doctrine and practice across all these countries. Others have addressed manifestations of the faith in cinema, art and architecture.¹⁵

In spite of such scholarship, however, the prevailing discourse in both Safavid and Shi'i studies found in the works of the especially visible/audible scholars in each field continues to privilege ›great man‹ and ›decline‹ – the former mainly Iranians and mainly urban-based figures at that. Thus one set of ›great men‹ is depicted as having ended the efforts of other ›great men‹ to move the Iranian project forward in a notionally progressive fashion: al-Majlisī ended the intellectual renaissance that was one of the many hallmarks of the reign of `Abbās I and in so doing directly facilitated the end of the Safavid dynasty while nearly 260 years later another religious figure, the Ayatollah Khomeini, crushed the modernising project of the last Pahlavi ruler, Muhammad Reza (d. 1980). To do so both religious figures are portrayed as having politicised a faith whose ›genuine‹ discourse valued the esoteric and the otherworldly. Al-Majlisī and Khomeini are thus implicitly, if not explicitly, two sides of the same coin just as are `Abbās I and the last shah.

10 Arjomand, *Shadow of God*, 23, 61-63, 190f, 269-270, citing the statement of Corbin quoted above.

11 Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*.

12 See Nasr *et al.*, *Shi'ism, Doctrines, Thought and Spirituality* and Nasr *et al.*, *Expectation of the Millennium*.

13 Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, 125-126, 137-139. The original was published in 1992 as *Le Guide Divin*.

14 See, for example, Dabashi, *Iran*, wherein he argued that Shi'ism, as a religion of protest, could only contradict itself when it became an ›ideology‹ and Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* in which he also addressed ›Islamic Ideology‹. Therein, as well as in his *Shi'ism*, the Muslims/Shi'a are mainly Iranian.

15 On the population figures and on these works, see the introduction to Newman, *Twelver Shiism*, cited above.

The paradigm of empire

The organizing theme of empires has been becoming increasingly popular in recent years, in both the US and Europe, to wit the ›Empire in the Middle East‹ project of Edinburgh University Press,¹⁶ Fred Donner *et al.*, with Cambridge University Press¹⁷ and Jeroen Duindam's ›Eurasian Empires‹ project.¹⁸

To be sure, the term ›empire‹ has been used before with reference to the Safavids. In his 1974 multi-volume *The Venture of Islam*, Marshall Hodgson was perhaps the first contemporary writer to use the term with respect to the Safavids, as well as the Ottomans and the Mughals, when he styled all three as the ›gunpowder empires‹ of the region in the pre-modern period. More recently Dale¹⁹ and Streusand²⁰ also addressed the Safavid ›empire‹. Both Hodgson and Streusand devote separate chapters to each of the three, whereas Dale takes a thematic approach to the question.

It is notable, however, that none of these three authors specialise in Safavid history and that their discussions of the Safavids generally relied on an uneven smattering of secondary sources.

Hodgson addressed the Safavids first of the three empires in *The Venture of Islam*, volume three, entitled *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*. In the process, however, his abstraction of Safavid history broke no new ground. Notably, for example, al-Majlisī makes his customary appearance, as a ›dogmatic and bigoted scholar‹; although evidence for this characterization is not cited, from early in this chapter's footnotes Hodgson makes clear his debt to Lockhart. Hodgson refers also to the increasing influence of the ›religious establishment‹ and, in the reign of the last shah, the manner in which the religious scholars (no others of whom are identified) came to dominate politics in the absence of any ›firm hand‹ at the top such that ›the state seemed powerless‹ against the ›rebellion and invasion [that] loomed on many frontiers‹ and resulted in the sacking of Esfahan in 1722.²¹

For Dale, nearly four decades later, al-Majlisī is the most powerful (and only) religious figure in the realm,²² while for Streusand he is, only slightly, more complex.²³

But, that al-Majlisī remains so pivotal a figure when, in reality, those who write about him as such are largely unfamiliar with his voluminous Arabic and Persian-language works let alone the background against which he composed them, attests to the endurance of the ›great man‹ paradigm and, indeed, the larger decline paradigm as well. Indeed, Dale reprises the decline paradigm in a chapter entitled ›Golden Ages‹, and Streusand actually tries to argue for the continued relevance of ›decline‹.²⁴

Perhaps more interestingly/importantly, none of these three offered any definition of ›empire‹, either with reference to any of the three empires under consideration or, more generally, with reference to spatial or historical contexts/characteristics, e.g. European ver-

16 <http://www.euppublishing.com/series/EHIE>; retrieved 30 September 2015.

17 Donner *et al.*, *Empire in the Middle East*.

18 <http://hum.leiden.edu/history/eurasia/>; retrieved 30 September 2015.

19 Dale, *Muslim Empires*.

20 Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*.

21 Hodgson, *Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, 16–58, esp. 53, 28n3, 54, 55, 58.

22 Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 190.

23 Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*, 166.

24 Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 187–188; Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*, 5.

sus Middle Eastern, ›ancient‹ versus ›pre-modern‹ versus ›modern‹ empires, to discuss, for example, the distinguishing features of the Roman, British and even the American ›empire‹. In fact, Streusand uses the term ›empire‹ for many Islamic period political entities, though Egypt's Mamluks (1250-1517) seem to be a kingdom and the Safavids emerge as both an empire and a polity, the latter after our own fashion.²⁵

Matthee, a specialist in the Safavid period, in a 2010 discussion of the Safavids and empire, did at least offer something of a definition of empire – referring, for example to geography, ideology and ›the status and role of the ruler‹. But, remaining faithful to ›great man‹ and ›decline‹, he did not apply the term when referring to the Safavids in the post-Abbās I period.²⁶

By way of contrast, by this time, Ottoman studies had long since seen off ›decline‹.²⁷

The Safavid ›empire‹ reconfigured: a way forward?

If some of Safavid Iran's legacies for modern Iran – borders, language and faith – have been noted, other aspects of that legacy have not been well considered to date.

As prior to and during the two centuries of the Safavid period so also for most of Iran's subsequent history to the later years of the twentieth century Iranian society remained overwhelmingly rural/tribal in nature. In addition, its population varied along many different ethnic, linguistic and religious lines.²⁸ Also, despite this latter legacy, a sense of a common but distinctive ›Persian‹ cultural discourse may be said to have become increasingly universally shared. Finally, far from ever featuring a highly centralised state structure ruled by an all-powerful, highly authoritarian ruler, post-Safavid Iran possessed but a very limited central-state structure which ›ruled‹ only by negotiation and compromise with the plateau's many other constituencies – tribes, urban elements such as artisans and merchants, Shi'i religious figures based at home and abroad and even regional and extra-regional elements, the latter also comprising religious, commercial and political figures and forces. Such a system was, in fact, also a feature of Safavid Iran.

Indeed, the Safavid polity recalled more than not many features of both Mongol and especially the Timurid ›systems‹, in their patronage of a range of religious discourses (Muslim and non-Muslim) and icons of distinctly Persian culture, as well as the post-Timurid regional polities' reliance on the region's Turkic tribal elements for military muscle and on the native Persian (Tajik) class for administrative expertise.

At the same time, although Safavid Iran was not known for its massive territorial aggrandizement, *pace* the Roman Empire and, more contemporaneously, the Ottoman Empire, the Safavids did carve out a single entity from the many smaller polities previously extant across the Iranian plateau.

25 Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*, 24, 135-200.

26 Matthee, Was Safavid Iran an Empire? On his continued ›commitment‹ to Safavid ›decline‹, and to al-Majlisi's role therein, see Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*.

27 See İnalcık and Quataert, *Economic and Social History*, especially Faroqhi, Crisis and Change, her contribution on the stereotypical view that the Ottoman Empire reached its peak during the reign of Sulayman ›the Magnificent‹ (reg. 1520-1566). See also Lowry, *Nature of the Early Ottoman State*.

28 Iran itself remained a predominantly rural society – tribal and peasant in nature – until some time in the late 1970s/early 1980s. See above n4; Floor, Hospitals in Safavid and Qajar Iran, 37-116; and the 2011 population census: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_PHC/Iran/Iran-2011-Census-Results.pdf, retrieved 30 September 2015.

In fact, over its years as the long-lasting dynasty in the history of Islamic Iran the Safavid period witnessed the generation of a complex political, socio-economic and religio-cultural paradigm across the plateau whose legacy informed the longer-term Iranian and, therefore, the larger regional, dynamic up to and through the late twentieth century.

The Safavid empire period did link the medieval and modern periods of Iranian history but in ways that far transcend political dates, military events and economic trends.

A more dynamic definition of the term »empire« in the pre-modern period might focus as much if not less on the latter as on more fundamental developments in/transformations of society and culture and the longevity of the legacy thereof. This model values consideration of political developments and dateable events and the goings-and-comings of elites, but also as, if not more, importantly, the evaluation of the evolution of social and also cultural dynamics. The latter includes the assessment of »cultural markers« and their growing acceptance both across a region but also throughout all sectors of its society, not merely among the minority urban elite. A judgment on the »success« of such an empire would include assessment of the extent to which a given society was so transformed that its distinguishing features are visible generations if not centuries after its political »end«, and perhaps even well beyond its political boundaries at the broadest point of its territorial expansion.

In such a broader, more complex sense, then, Safavid Iran was an »empire«.

A brief sketch of this more inclusive model would commence by noting that the historical nature of the plateau's society as a multi-cultural entity entails discussion of the impact of the several sets of invasions across the plateau by various waves of Central Asia-based tribal elements – the Saljuks in the eleventh century but, more especially, the Mongols and Timurids in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries respectively – and, in the wake of the political disintegration of the latter, the rise of the Turkish Aq Qoyūnlū and Qara Qoyūnlū tribal polities that dominated the region immediately prior to the Safavids. The foundations of the latter two lay in a working alliance between the different Turkic tribal elements that arrived on the plateau with these invading forces and Tajik elites who provided the administrative expertise needed. The politico-cultural discourse of all of these polities mirrored, and so spoke to, those of both constituencies. But, the latter two tribal polities in particular did not succeed in institutionalizing the links between these and the political establishment or even creating any distinctive, widely accepted and long-lasting cultural legacy that drew in and earned the loyalty/confidence of these, let alone any other, constituencies for longer than the reign of one »great man«.

The Safavid Sufi order, originally both a quietist and Sunni movement based in Ardabil in the fourteenth century, gradually evolved into a militant messianic movement more reflective of the Shi'i/Sufi messianic and egalitarian discourse then widespread across the plateau in both the rural and urban settings, i.e. among both Turks and Tajiks.

The influx of supporters from both, initially the Qizilbāsh coalition of tribes – many of whom were among the tribal levies of the two earlier Turkish polities – encouraged the order and the tribes to interact with each other through successive military campaigns, via marriages and later the granting of lands and titles/posts. Tajik elites were also incorporated into this dynamic and together Turk and Tajik elements came to dominate the nascent centre of the Safavid movement/dynasty over the fifteenth century.

The military success of Ismā'il I, did consist of, firstly, taking Tabriz in 1501 and then, secondly, taking the territories of the eight or so existing polities on the plateau over the next ten years. But the polity that was established during his reign was a joint Turkish/Tajik project of which he was more a transcendent spokesman than an absolutist ruler.

This Turkish/Tajik dynamic dominated later shahs even as members of the Qizilbāsh coalition and their Tajik allies jostled, sometimes violently, for pre-eminence within that dynamic at such crucial junctures as the deaths of the first two shahs, Ismā'il and his son Ṭahmāsp. Crucially, however, neither of these civil wars entailed questioning the continued legitimacy of the Safavid order/house.

By the 1629 death of `Abbās I, great-grandson of Ismā'il I, working arrangements between these two were more regularized than they had been over the sixteenth century. The result was that the accession of subsequent shahs – no sitting Safavid shah died other than a natural death – was an ever smoother, peaceful process, unmarked by the twin, existential challenges of internal civil strife and consequent foreign invasions that followed the deaths of Ismā'il and Ṭahmāsp.

The ruling Turk/Tajik alliance was also evolving over the period, gaining and losing ›members‹. Turkish elements whose support for various losing candidates for shah, for example, were eliminated and the seventeenth century was marked by the addition of yet further constituencies into the realm – new tribal elements, local Armenian and other Christian elements, Shi'i clerical elites and non-elites, a growing local middle ranking artisanal and commercial class and even, across the seventeenth century especially, foreign commercial, political and religious elements.

Safavid society did remain predominantly tribal and rural in nature: the political centre remained politically pre-eminent but the accrual of absolutist power by the shah and his house remained limited by the diffusion of power among members of the Turk/Tajik military/political coalition. Well connected to society precisely because of its dependence on the support of the plateau's different constituencies, the court itself had to be and was responsive to evolving socio-economic and political challenges, domestic and foreign, and cultivated allies among all in the pursuit of strategies for stability in the face of such challenges.

That tribal/rural nature, the notion of ›alliance politics‹ and the consequently limited extent of central government power remained features of Iranian society until well into the later twentieth century.²⁹

Although Twelver Shi'ism was declared the realm's ›official‹ religion at the capture of Tabriz in 1501, the new faith in fact made few concrete inroads among elites of the Turk/Tajik coalition over the sixteenth century; elites' at best nominal conversions from Sunnism to the new faith were accepted over this century. Among the ›popular‹ classes in both rural and urban settings, the same Shi'i/Sufi messianic discourse that brought the Safavids to power remained widespread. Put off by the heterogeneous spiritual discourse of the house and the populace, Ottoman military prowess and the civil wars that broke out at the deaths of Ismā'il and Ṭahmāsp, few orthodox sixteenth century Twelver clerics abandoned their homes in the Arab centres of the faith to the West for Iran, even though those homes were located in territory under the control of the Sunni Ottomans.

The faith received a boost beginning in the reign of `Abbās I as association with the faith and its spokesmen was a means by which the centre sought to legitimize/embed its authority in the face of the series of the existential internal and external challenges that followed the 1576 death of Ṭahmāsp. The Turk/Tajik-dominated centre as well as the newly incorporated constituencies patronized clerical elites and embellished the realm with religious material infrastructure – mosques, schools, shrines, etc. – marking their common, and very public, acceptance of the polity's spiritual and, hence, political legitimacy.

29 Indeed, Martin, in her discussion of the Qajar period (1795-1925), characterizes these arrangements as ›the politics of pact‹. See Martin, *Qajar Pact*. See also Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*.

The establishment of such infrastructure in this period and the control over the receipt and distribution of the religious taxes that the Shi'i *ulama* had by this time established as representatives of the hidden Twelfth Shi'i Imam were the bases for the position of material independence from the political centre that the clerical estate came to enjoy within Iranian society. This clerical power and material independence, another legacy of the period seldom noted by Western scholars as rooted in the Safavid period, was the basis for clerical political activism against the political centre in Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The plateau has also had a long history of multi-confessionalism prior to the appearance of the Safavids on the scene. The Safavid period also saw the non-Muslim population, domestic and foreign, receive the recognition and support of the centre. The Armenian community of Julfa, in Eastern Anatolia, was forcibly relocated to the newly-designated capital of Esfahan during `Abbās I's reign, for example, to deprive the Ottomans of, and to give the Safavids control over, the Armenian merchants' domination of long-distance trade routes and enlist their support in, and tax, the export of Iranian silk to Europe. The newly arrived Armenians were, however, encouraged to establish their own distinctive religious infrastructure – a good deal of which remains visible today.

To be sure, combinations of domestic and foreign political and economic challenges/crises together with natural calamities – famine and disease, for example – did result in local Jews and Christian elements occasionally being scapegoated by the centre and its associates for their ties with Western elements. Western missionaries were welcomed by the Centre as representatives of potential allies of their home countries against the Ottomans, though the outreach efforts of these foreign Christians among Iranian Christians generated opposition from local Christian elites and, therefore, their court allies and Muslim elites as well.

This complex confessional dynamic, rooted both in the pre-Safavid period and only further enhanced in the Safavid period, was another aspect of the Safavid legacy, and would in fact become even more complex in later centuries.

As to non-religious cultural discourse, the period witnessed the further development of distinctly Iranian styles of art, architecture, literature, as well as the role of the Persian language. Patronage was important to developments in these realms of activity. In the 17th century, patronage by both Turk and Tajik court elements and also by non-court elite and middle class elements played a key role in the embedding of a common, distinctly Iranian cultural heritage across the plateau whose legacy, as that of Twelver Shi'ism, survived and thrived in succeeding centuries.

This said, although Persian did become an important language on the plateau, tribal and other ethnic dialects continued to be widespread. These and, in certain regions, languages such as Arabic and varieties of Turkish, and the cultural (and religious) traditions associated with the speakers thereof, held their own through the period and into the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Turkish dialects are often acknowledged as forming Iran's second language such that in some areas and among classes/professions Persian was, and still may be, the country's second language.³⁰

As to changing foreign and particularly Western forms of involvement in Iran over the period, Safavid Iran's main protagonists over the 16th century were the Ottomans to the West, and to a lesser extent the Uzbeks to the Northeast and the Mughals in the Subcontinent,

30 For a recent study of language distribution in western Iran, see Aliakbari *et al.*, *Language Distribution*. The authors note the four main language of the province in question as Kurdish (and its dialects), Luri, Laki (the latter two being tribal dialects) and Arabic.

all Sunni in orientation. The presence in the region of the Portuguese and other Western elements in the same century is also notable. Especially following the Ottoman defeat at Lepanto in 1571, the Safavids were keen to create an alliance with the European powers against the Ottomans. To this end, once `Abbās I had stabilised his internal position, he encouraged ties with these powers.

But the period was also known for the rise of the great Western trading companies. The presence of the English and Dutch East India Companies in Iran in `Abbās I's reign soon eclipsed that of other European powers, the Portuguese especially. Ties with the former were cultivated for both political and economic reasons, in particular for their interest in Iranian silk, the domestic trade monopoly in which was won by the New Julfa Armenians. Over the century Western interest in Iran's silk dwindled in favour of sources further East. However, both companies' export of specie, of which Iran had none of its own, contributed to domestic price inflation that, in combination with a series of natural calamities, disrupted the realm's social fabric. A combination of European and local dynamics saw the Dutch move much further East while the English remained in the Persian Gulf area.

Western missionaries and other travellers also made their way to and through Iran over this period. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Russians also appeared on the scene, even joining the Ottomans in invading Iran in the years after 1722. With the Russians' arrival the stage was set for the ›Great Game‹, the Russo-British confrontation that would be especially fateful for Iran in the later eighteenth century and well into the twentieth century.

Concluding remarks

Safavid studies has long been dominated by references to the ›great man‹ and to ›decline‹. Reliance thereon was a feature of pre-Iranian Revolution discussions of the period and has remained so over the decades since, despite the expansion in the field's membership and sub disciplines. The discourses of ›great man‹ and ›decline‹ privilege the political and economic, mainly urban, realms while downplaying, if not ignoring, references to social, religious and cultural trends and events. Recent references to a Safavid ›empire‹ have only reinforced the recourse to these two paradigms.

An ›empire‹, in the sense reconfigured herein, encompasses activities across more realms than fewer and leaves a legacy beyond its own immediate political end-date.

Such a modelling – addressing a wider, inclusive, not a narrower, exclusive, range of trends and events – suggests that the period bequeathed a broad range of legacies to successive generations on the plateau, if not also beyond, that remained visible well into the later twentieth century at least. In this, then, Safavid Iran was an empire and a successful one at that.

References

- Abrahamian, Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, 2008).
- Aliakbari, Mohammad, Gheitasi, Mojtaba and Anonby, Erik, On Language Distribution in Ilam Province, Iran, *Iranian Studies* 48/6 (2015) 835-850.
- Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad A., *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism, The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, translated from French by David Streight (Albany, 1994).
- Arjomand, Said A., *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago, 1984).
- Avery, Peter, *Modern Iran* (New York, 1965).
- Bill, James, *The Politics of Iran* (New York, 1972).
- Browne, Edward G., *A Literary History of Persia*, Volume 4: *Modern Times* (1500-1924) (Cambridge, 1959).
- Corbin, Henri, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, re-edited by Paul Kegan, translated from French by Liadain Sherrard (London, 1993).
- Cottam, Richard W., *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh, 1964).
- Dabashi, Hamid, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York, 2007).
- Dabashi, Hamid, *Shi'ism. A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2011).
- Dabashi, Hamid, *Theology of Discontent* (New York, 1993).
- Dale, Stephen F., *The Muslim Empires* (Cambridge, 2010).
- Donner, Fred M., Greeley, Robin Adèle, Sluglett, Peter and Weiss, Harvey (eds.), *Empire in the Middle East: from Antiquity to the British and French Mandates* (Cambridge, 2016) forthcoming.
- Floor, Willem, *The Economy of Safavid Persia* (Wiesbaden, 2000).
- Floor, Willem, Hospitals in Safavid and Qajar Iran: An Enquiry into their Number, Growth and Importance, in Fabrizio Speziale (ed.), *Hospitals in Iran and India, 1500-1950s* (Leiden, 2012) 37-116.
- Faruqi, Suraiya, Crisis and Change 1590–1699, in: İnalcık and Quataert, *Economic and Social History* (Cambridge, 1994) 411-637.
- Halliday, Fred E., *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London, 1979).
- Halpern, Manfred, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton, 1963).
- Hodgson, Marshall G. S., *The Venture of Islam*, Volume 3: *Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, 1974).
- İnalcık, Halil, and Quataert, Donald (eds.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*, 2 volumes (Cambridge, 1994).
- Katouzian, Homa, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran* (New York, 1981).
- Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah Moosavi, *Islam and Revolution*, translated and edited by Hamid Algar (London, 1985).
- Kramer, Martin (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution* (Boulder, 1987).
- Lerner, Daniel, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (New York, 1958).
- Lockhart, Laurence, *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (Cambridge, 1958).
- Lowry, Heath W., *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany, 2003).
- Martin, Vanessa, *The Qajar Pact, Bargaining, Protest and the State in Nineteenth-Century Persia* (London, 2005).

- Matthee, Rudi, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London, 2012).
- Matthee, Rudi, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran, Silk for Silver 1600-1730* (Cambridge, 1999).
- Matthee, Rudi, Was Safavid Iran an Empire?, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010) 233-265.
- Minorsky, Vladimir (ed.), *Tadhkirat alMuluk. A Manual of Safavid Administration* (circa 1137/1725), translated by Vladimir Minorsky (London, 1943).
- Nasr, Seyyed H., The School of Ispahan, in: Mian M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Volume 2 (Wiesbaden, 1966) 904-932.
- Nasr, Seyyed H., Hamid, Dabashi and Nasr, Seyyed V. R. (eds.), *Shi'ism, Doctrines, Thought and Spirituality* (Albany, 1988).
- Nasr, Seyyed H., Hamid, Dabashi and Nasr, Seyyed V. R. (eds.), *Expectation of the Millennium: Shiism in History* (Albany, 1989).
- Newman, Andrew J., *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London, 2006).
- Newman, Andrew J., *Twelver Shiism: Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632 to 1722* (Edinburgh, 2013).
- Savory, Roger, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge, 1980).
- Streusand, Douglas E., *Islamic Gunpowder Empires* (Boulder, 2011).
- Wallerstein, Immanuel M., *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Los Angeles, 1974).